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Q3(b)

Analyse Marxian conception of historical materialism as a critique of Hegelian dialectics

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- Analyse the Marxian conception of historical materialism as a critique of Hegelian dialectics
- Keep the analysis within a 20-mark length

Revision summary

- **Hegel**: history as dialectical unfolding of Spirit.

Marx keeps process and contradiction, inverts the subject to material production.

Base, superstructure, and class struggle replace the Idea as first mover.

Appearance and commodity fetishism continue a critical dialectic.

Stages must not be read as a mechanical timetable.

Introduction

G. W. F. **Hegel**'s dialectic treated history as the unfolding of Spirit through contradiction. **Karl Marx** kept contradiction and process, and inverted the subject: material production and class, not the Idea, move history. Historical materialism is that inversion as a research programme.

Body

Hegelian dialectics, briefly

- Reality is rational process. Thesis and antithesis are aufgehoben, preserved and cancelled, in a higher synthesis.
- The state and philosophy appear as moments of Spirit's self-knowledge.
- Ludwig Feuerbach had already criticised religion as projected essence; **Marx** pushed the critique into labour and class.

Marx's inversion

- In the **German Ideology** and the **1859 Preface**, being determines consciousness, not the reverse as a first cause.
- Forces and relations of production form a base. Legal and political superstructure, and forms of consciousness, arise on it, with feedback.
- Class struggle is the motor. Modes of production, from ancient to feudal to capitalist, are historical types, not Spirit's costumes.

What is kept from **Hegel**

- Totality, contradiction, and history as process, against a static pile of facts.
- **Critique of appearance:** the commodity form hides social relations, as **Marx** showed in **Capital**.

What is refused

- The Idea as subject. Workers and owners in a definite labour process are the subjects.
- A merely philosophical resolution of contradiction. Emancipation is practical, through transformation of production.

Later use and caution

- Engels's popular summaries sometimes looked like a mechanical sequence. **Marx's** own analyses of 1848 and of India were more conjunctural.
- **Max Weber** criticised monocausal economic explanation. The critique of **Hegel** still stands as a turn to material life.
- Indian agrarian class and informal labour can be read with this toolkit without waiting for a textbook sequence of stages.

Flow diagram

Hegel Spirit dialectic -> Marx inversion
Marx inversion -> Forces and relations of production
Forces and relations of production -> Class struggle
Class struggle -> Modes of production
Idea as subject -> Rejected

Conclusion

Historical materialism criticises **Hegel** by standing the dialectic on material production and class. Contradiction remains; Spirit does not. The programme is a history of labour and property, not a hymn to the Idea.

Facts & figures

1859 Preface

Compact statement of historical materialism: being and consciousness, base and superstructure.

German Ideology

Premises of real individuals producing their means of life.

Aufhebung

Hegel's term for cancellation-and-preservation; **Marx** relocates it in class process.

Capital

Applies the inverted dialectic to the commodity, surplus value, and accumulation.

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